



Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Areas of Needed Focus in Veterinary Medicine



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Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have garnered additional focus in all areas of life, and veterinary medicine is no exception. Before veterinary professionals can begin the process of engaging in DEI, we must have a base knowledge of where we stand. Below are some statistics from the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges' (AAVMC) 2019-2020 Annual Data Report:¹

- Just over 70% of veterinary students are white, with no other race/ethnic group surpassing 10% of students. These numbers correspond to the distribution of applicants for that year as well.
- Over 80% of applicants for the class of 2024 identified as heterosexual/straight. Those identifying as bisexual, gay/lesbian, or other were all under 10% each.
- Over 80% of applicants for the class of 2024 identified as female. Less than 20% identified as male, and the percentage of those identifying as transgender or another gender was extremely low.

While these numbers are specific to veterinary students, there is the assumption that similar trends would be reported for veterinary technology/nursing programs based on demographics seen in practice.

Several groups in the veterinary medicine community have taken steps to strengthen the diversity within the veterinary healthcare profession. This change needs to happen at every level, from national leaders to practice leadership. The AAVMC and the AVMA recently launched a joint Commission for a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Veterinary Profession. This commission brought representatives from across veterinary leadership together, including me as the NAVTA representative. Additionally, several associations representing underserved groups in veterinary medicine, such as LatinxVMA, PrideVMC, and the BlackDVM Network, have come together to meet regularly and work to support one another to increase DEI in the veterinary space.

NAVTA has also been working in the DEI space on a variety of fronts. With the election cycle in 2020, the nominations committee worked to identify potential candidates that brought diversity to the NAVTA board. NAVTA has representation on the AVMA DEI Commission and has 2 representatives that join the previously mentioned calls of diverse veterinary medicine organizations. In 2021, NAVTA is forming its own DEI committee to dive deeper into what NAVTA can and should be doing to address diversity, equity, and inclusion, both within the association and throughout the veterinary nursing field.

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These groups have or will bring resources to the larger veterinary community to aid in implementation of equity and inclusion programs, with the goal of increasing diversity throughout veterinary medicine. These efforts provide just the first layer of this immense effort. Practices, and even individuals, need to be part of DEI initiatives in order for us to see any meaningful change across our field. For those who are unsure what it means to be equitable and inclusive, getting started can be daunting. But it does not have to be. Take a look at a few easy steps anyone can take to become more inclusive and make their practice an inclusive space.

Figure Out How You Fit in the Community

For some, that means realizing that they have privileges others do not and some level of implicit bias. There is a variety of books on the topic of privilege,² and UCLA has put together a series of short videos explaining the concept of implicit bias.³ The AVMA also has a webinar on unconscious bias.⁴ After understanding what implicit bias is and why it is important to recognize, the next step is to identify our own implicit bias. Harvard's Project Implicit offers several tests that focus on areas for potential implicit bias such as transgender, skin tone, and disability.⁵ Even someone who feels they hold no bias—actually, especially those who feel they hold no bias—should take at least a few of these tests. From experience, I can say the results provide an eye-opening reality check. We all hold biases, and the profession needs to work toward recognition and change.

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Become an Ally

Once we have an understanding of how we fit in the community, the next step is to be an ally. This can come in many forms. For those who identify as transgender or nonbinary, pronouns can be a frustration they face all too often. Using someone's correct pronouns is important, especially when inaccurate pronouns are often used. Being an ally not only means making the effort to use proper pronouns for everyone but to also create a space where people feel comfortable to share their true pronouns. Try introducing yourself with your pronouns. If everyone takes this simple step when they introduce themselves, it allows for someone who is transgender or nonbinary to more easily share their pronouns.

Another way to be an ally is to speak up when insensitive, racist, or hateful things are said. Insensitive language is not always intentional but it should always be called out as a learning experience. Words such as “grandfathered” are well ingrained in our lexicon but have racist roots.⁶ By calling out this kind of language, individuals can organically create an inclusive space within their practice.

Allow Everyone to Be Their Authentic Self

This might be easier said than done but is far from impossible to accomplish with some effort. We have established that everyone holds some implicit bias, which means we may not realize we are judging someone based on a certain aspect of their self. It also may be difficult to connect with someone who has a vastly different experience or identity. How do we overcome that? First, come to the realization that your discomfort is on you, not them. And what do we do when we don't understand something? We learn about it. Do your homework and ask



questions. Keep in mind that this is our own issue to overcome, so we need to be sensitive in asking direct questions. But, if done correctly, it can be a way to help the individual feel more comfortable that their authentic self is being valued.

These are just a few examples of ways to start a journey of inclusivity. Maya Angelou once said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” By doing some research and being open to learning about differences among our colleagues, we will continue to “know better.” Using what we learn to create encouraging, supportive spaces for all our colleagues will ensure we “do better.” **TVN**

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